

# QF-4s: born to fly, reborn to die

by **Laura Pellegrino**  
*Sunburst staff writer*

There is one plane based at Holloman that pilots don't eject from after it's been hit by a missile.

That's because the pilots, members of Detachment 1 of the 82nd Aerial Target Squadron, are already safe on the ground controlling the aircraft via remote control.

The squadron provides full-scale aerial targets for Department of Defense weapons testing. The targets are retired F-4 Phantoms that are transformed into radio controlled QF-4s.

"We fly the ultimate radio controlled air planes," said Lt. Col. Bob Kay, Det. 1, 82nd ATRS commander.

The team flies about 400 sorties a year, but only about five percent of flights are unmanned drones, Kay said. The remaining 95 percent are manned flights.

"A manned flight is necessary when testing certain weapons systems, for training and as a dress rehearsal for an unmanned flight," Kay said.

"Once the plane is converted into a drone, we don't fly it manned again," said Tech. Sgt. Timothy Lewis, Det. 1, 82nd ATRS supply quality assurance evaluator.

The drones can be launched, pi-

loted and landed remotely either from White Sands Missile Range or from a mobile control system. The mobile control system is a converted step van that allows controllers to be on the runway while controlling the plane. The inside and roof of the truck have all of the equipment necessary to control the aircraft. One pilot controls the pitch of the aircraft, while the other controls the roll.

At the end of an unmanned mission, the plane can land on auto pilot or can be by pilots in the mobile control system.

Planes are destroyed very often, but if it's damaged beyond repair and can't land safely, a remote controlled detonation takes it out of the air, Lewis said. Out of about 15 unmanned missions flown last year, seven ended in the destruction of the aircraft.

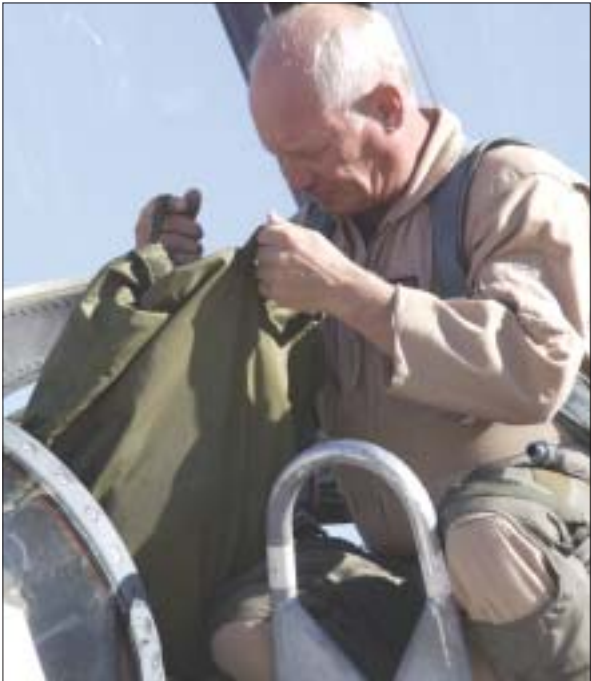
"These are the SUVs of fighter planes," Lewis said. "They can go through anything."

United States Air Force fighter squadrons from around the world travel to the 82nd ATRS home base at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. to test their weapons systems.

"It's actually a federal law that all ground to air and air to air weapons must be validated against us," Kay said. "It's important that the people who develop these weapons systems know that they work."



Mark Perkins, pilot, removes the parachute flag from a QF-4.



Jim Fischer, pilot, inspects his gear.



Joe Newton, crew chief, directs Maj. Jim Schreiner, pilot, toward the runway in preparation for launch of a manned QF-4 mission.



Tony Edwards, crew chief, removes the parking block from a QF-4 tire.



Maj. Jim Schreiner does an end of runway check before takeoff.



Jim Luzano, crew chief, observes the QF-4 during flight control checks.

Photos by Laura Pellegrino